

#152 Write about a life changing coffee shop experience.

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March 22, 2024



I've never experienced being in a coffee shop, but if I could, here's how I imagine it: I'd wear a pale green with sandal base coloured pattiyala chudi, a dress I've never found flattering, paired with a black leather purse adorned with a yellow miniature toy keychain, despite my usual laziness with bags. My hair would be free-flowing with a slight roll in the front, although in reality, it's often tangled. I'd wear a medium-sized black bindi and thin kajal, even though in real life, the bindi never stays and the kajal smudges. Adding artificial silver jhumkas, steel bangles on both wrists, and a silver long chain would complete the ensemble, although it's quite different from my usual fashion choices. Lastly, I'd wear flat slippers, even though I've avoided them since my accident. This would be my imagined appearance in a coffee shop setting.

Who will I encounter there? A too obvious match or my boyfriend? Since I already have a boyfriend in reality, let's alter the scenario: imagining meeting my real boyfriend for the first time. It adds an intriguing twist! Let's say I'm meeting him for the first time. Normally, I would be the one waiting for him to arrive, but in this imagined scenario, he's the one waiting for me. As I hastily approach him from behind, I greet him in a soft voice. He turns around with a slightly annoyed yet amused expression, pointing at me and confirming my name. I nod and take a seat in front of him. From here on, everything unfolds in my imagination.

At first glance, he was impeccably dressed in a white shirt and grey pants, perfectly suited to him, with a visible belt and sleeves rolled up elegantly. He wore a watch and a karukali malai necklace tucked inside his shirt. His beard and mustache were neatly groomed, and his hair was well-combed. Completing the look were black sharp-edged shoes. When the waiter approached us for our order, he chose fresh juice while I opted for coffee, without either of us asking the other's preference. Until our order arrived, there was a slight silence, and I felt nervous. Sensing my unease, he broke the silence by suggesting we remain strangers until we finish our drinks, which clearly indicated his lack of interest in me. Surprisingly, I felt relieved, as I wasn't ready for marriage either. I expressed my relief with a smile, and he chuckled, remarking that he wasn't surprised. He explained that if I were interested, I would have arrived on time for our first meeting or apologized for any delay, or at the very least, I would have texted about my tardiness. Since I hadn't done any of these things, it was evident that I wasn't interested in him. His accurate predictions left me feeling both guilty and impressed. Disgusted with myself, I must have shown it on my face, but he reassured me not to worry and just be fine. As our order arrived, I attempted to initiate basic introductions, but he interrupted me, insisting that as strangers, we didn't need to know much about each other. I sensed a hint of attitude in his response but agreed nonetheless.

As we both took our first sip, I quipped with a sarcastic smile, "Having coffee or a conversation with strangers isn't a sin, is it?" He responded by asking if I had any prior experiences like this. I retorted that every friend of mine was once a stranger initially, so he asked there a chance for him to become a friend in the future? I left it to time to decide. He reminded me that he had asked not to inquire about him, so I decided to talk about myself instead. I gave a brief introduction, starting from my family background and studies, leading up to my hobbies and interests. He simply listened while sipping his juice, and I realized I was chatting away like a chatterbox, grateful to have someone listening to me. By the time he finished his juice, I was only halfway through my coffee.

He excused himself to use the restroom and returned within ten minutes. As he came back, he noticed my worried expression while I peered out the window to see that it had started raining. I had finished my cup of coffee by then. He questioned why I hadn't left before the rain began, leaving me puzzled. I couldn't understand why I should leave without saying goodbye. He simply smiled and took his seat. When the waiter asked if we wanted anything else to order, he turned to me and inquired if I wanted anything. I declined, preferring to wait for the rain to stop. He nodded in understanding and ordered

hot and spicy snacks. Just then, I excused myself to make a quick phone call, informing my friend that I might be late and asking her to pick me up at the bus stand. After hanging up, his order arrived, and I found myself curious about his gesture earlier. However, before I could ask him again, he caught my eye, smiled, and began eating, seeming quite engrossed. Feeling a bit irritated, I questioned why he couldn't ask me again if I wanted to eat. He smiled and signaled the waiter to bring a spoon, indicating that he was ready to share his plate with me. Without hesitation, I accepted the spoon and began eating from his plate, which he then moved between us. As I savored the delicious snacks and watched the rain, I realized it was the perfect accompaniment to the weather.

He questioned why I wasn't interested in marriage. With a nervous demeanor, I began to explain but halted, assuring him it wouldn't affect our interaction. I admitted to fearing marriage, new relationships, new families, and responsibilities, revealing that I suffer from Gamophobia. He seemed puzzled, asking if such a phobia truly existed. I insisted it did, but he dismissed it as foolishness and insanity. I clarified that I feared arguments, especially with a partner who I considered my soulmate; I couldn't bear to hurt them. He suggested avoiding fights and being understanding, but I argued it was impossible to never hurt each other in a relationship. He advised me to go with the flow and not give up easily. I countered with concerns about being hurt, cheated on, or abandoned. He acknowledged the sensibility of my fears but warned against missing out on a wonderful life with a partner. I acknowledged the societal pressure to marry but disclosed my plan to deter suitors by claiming to be a lesbian and eventually move abroad. He was shocked by my revelation, leaving him speechless.

He questioned if I truly identified as a lesbian. I quickly clarified that I would claim to be one to deter potential suitors, while continuing to eat calmly. However, he expressed concern about the repercussions of making false accusations, which could impact my future as well. Dismissing his worries, I reiterated my plan to move abroad, unconcerned about the consequences. He probed further, asking if my desire to leave was genuine or simply an attempt to avoid marriage. Without hesitation, I admitted that it was indeed to escape marriage, all while continuing to eat. He regarded me with incredulity, questioning if I had ever been in a serious relationship. I affirmed that I had, but it had ended, and I had no desire to provide explanations. He pressed on, asking if I currently desired to be in a relationship. I firmly stated that I was content with the love and support from my family and friends. However, when he asked if I truly didn't desire love, companionship, or a partner, I hesitated for a moment before reiterating my earlier stance. He questioned why I would declare myself phobic without experiencing it firsthand. As I finished my last spoonful, I mused that perhaps I didn't even want to try.

He grasped my chin and cheeks, turning my face to meet his gaze, and declared, "We are getting married." Shocked, I stammered, "What?" He let go and signaled for the waiter to clear our table. During the cleaning, I remained quiet. Once done, I mustered the courage to refuse. But as I spoke, he looked into my eyes and asserted, "Yes." I protested, insisting he couldn't force me. Unmoved, he stated that regardless of whether it was coercion or expression, we were getting married. Before I could respond, he continued,

acknowledging the potential for arguments, hurt feelings, and even separation, but insisted on marriage before any of that occurred. Perplexed, I asked if he was serious and if he was sympathizing with my phobia. He dismissed the notion, asserting that it wasn't about sympathy or my stupid phobic but about our previous decision to remain strangers. He claimed he now wanted to progress from that, though he sensed my reluctance. I countered that I hadn't explicitly stated my disinterest in marriage; it was merely my assumption.

He also mentioned that he noticed my nervousness and used the term "strangers" to calm me down. Sensing my disinterest in marriage, he expressed his willingness to not pursue marriage unless I was already committed to someone else. Initially, he had perceived me as arrogant, but my gestures of waiting for him and sharing food had left a positive impression on him.

He excused himself to take a call, and during his absence, I decided to leave and waited for an auto. However, he returned before I could leave and offered me a ride in his car. Initially hesitant, I eventually accepted, especially as the drizzle intensified, hinting at more rain. We rode in silence, but he seemed upset that I had left without saying goodbye. He dropped me near the bus stand and left, leaving me feeling a bit hurt and regretful for my rudeness. Nonetheless, being in his company had stirred something different within me.

Later, a friend called, inquiring about my meeting. I recounted the events, and when she asked if I was interested in him, I hesitated before admitting that he was cute, handsome, and notably understanding, despite his occasional flashes of anger. She pressed further, asking if I was interested in marrying him. I hesitated again but eventually admitted that I wasn't sure, although I felt like I could express my feelings. Before I could finish, I felt a touch on my shoulder, indicating that someone was behind me.

With shock and puzzlement, I saw him holding my purse, which I hadn't even realized I'd left behind in his car. Hastily, I assured my friend that I'd wait for her and ended the call. He returned my purse and started to turn away, but something inside me wanted to stop him. Before I could speak, he turned back, taking a few steps toward me. He expressed that he couldn't promise a perfect life, but together, we could strive to live perfectly by overcoming my fear of relationships and being true to our feelings. He admitted that he couldn't guarantee an absence of fights, hurt, or challenges, but he assured me that he would never give up on our relationship under any circumstances. A smile spread across my face, but I remained speechless.

As a token of our first meeting, he took the keychain from my purse and handed it to me. Curious, I silently questioned its significance. Without hesitation, he gently kissed my forehead and declared, "We are getting married."